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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000774

SIPDIS

BAGHDAD FOR AMBASSADOR ERELI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2018

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SUBJECT: PUBLIC HOUSING: ANOTHER FAILED ATTEMPT TO ADDRESS
SHI,A GRIEVANCES

REF: MANAMA 737

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: The Crown Prince announced to the press on October 30 that he had dissolved the Housing and Construction Committee (HCC), once billed as an initiative that would ensure the fair distribution of public housing. Many Shi'a seized on the news to reiterate their complaints about alleged sectarian discrimination, but few will miss the HCC itself. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (U) The 2002 constitution states that housing is a right for all citizens. Bahrainis who earn less than BD 1500 (USD 4000) monthly can apply to the GOB for a free or subsidized home, loan, or plot of land. However, Shi'a regularly complain that they have less access to these benefits than Sunnis do. Some Shi'a say they have been waiting for their handout since 1992 (reftel).

¶3. (U) The Crown Prince established the Housing and Construction Committee (HCC) in 2004, charging it with the mission of fairly distributing government housing. On October 30, the Crown Prince announced to the press that he had dissolved the HCC.

Crown Prince distancing himself from failure?

¶4. (SBU) The prevailing interpretation on the Shi'a street is that the Crown Prince wanted to distance himself from a committee that was looking more and more like a failure. The Crown Prince had publicly promised that the large Northern City housing project on reclaimed land would benefit the "sons of the Northern Governorate" - code for Shi'a. The project is still incomplete and is more than two years behind schedule. Shi'a are swapping rumors that as much as 60% of the Northern City's housing has already been sold or given to Sunni families and developers, reducing the amount of land available for public housing - all with the consent of the HCC.

Shi'a criticize government failure

¶5. (U) In response to the dissolution of the HCC several predominantly Shi'a villages staged protests October 31 and November 1 that called on the government to fulfill its housing promises. The Shi'a Wifaq political society released a statement November 2 that interpreted the demise of the HCC as a failure of the housing reforms. Wifaq Secretary General Sheikh Ali Salman told media that the dissolution of the HCC

"raised an alarm that the government has no strategy for solving the housing crisis." Mansour Al Jamri, editor in chief of Al Wasat, the largest opposition daily, focused his November 3 column on the lack of a coherent housing strategy, and emphasized to CDA on November 9 that the government's failure to address housing adequately continued to sour its relations with the Shi'a community.

16. (SBU) Owing to its failure to deliver equitable housing, the HCC had few admirers within Wifaq and the Shi'a community in general. Even Wifaq's anger seemed more for show - Ali Salman's Foreign Affairs adviser, Saeed Al Majid, told poloff on November 4, "we are very upset," and then promptly changed the topic.

Possible Up Side

17. (SBU) Several municipal councils have discussed one potential positive outcome - with the dissolution of the HCC, another layer of bureaucracy disappears. The Housing Ministry previously couldn't respond to municipal requests without HCC approval.

18. (C) Comment: The three chief grievances of mainstream Shi'a are their under-representation in parliament, the informal exclusion of Shi'a from the armed police and military, and housing. Of these, housing should be, politically at least, the easiest grievance for the GOB to address. However, the GOB is not doing so very effectively. End comment.

MANAMA 00000774 002 OF 002

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